Patterns of Power — a case study

LEAVE HIM NOW WITH US AND LET HIM RULE OVER US IF HE CAN

Britain in Afghanistan, 1839–1881: the purest test of the position logic — a warlordism that never cooled into a self-running order, a seat that was never there to seize, and an empire that learned, across two disasters and forty years, that you cannot install a chair; you can only rent the man who already sits in one.

A case study in the Patterns of Power series · Thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed

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Why this case is the clean one

Kenya was expensive because the conquered order had left no seat a stranger could sit in — no apex, no tax-machine, no office that bound the whole. But Kenya let the expense hide behind two flattering facts: the British floor eventually held, and beneath it lay a cheap-pole order — the *githaka* world — that had long since cooled into the furniture of reality, so the colony at least looked, from London, like a going concern that ran on something.

Afghanistan strips both comforts away and leaves the logic naked. Here the floor never held: the British were expelled twice, the first time with the near-total destruction of an army. And the order underneath was not a cheap-pole, self-running world at all — it was still *hot* warlordism, a coalition of armed chiefs that had never cooled into anything a conqueror could rent. So Afghanistan is the control with the padding removed. It shows what the position logic looks like when a warlord meets a country that offers him nothing to seize and no belief to inherit — and it shows the answer arriving, at last, not as a better conquest but as the abandonment of conquest

for something cheaper: paying a genuine warlord to be the apparatus, rather than manufacturing one and paying to hold him up.

This is a study about the men on top, told in their own terms. The men who ran British India were warlords with an accountant's problem: they had the best army in Asia, a chronic shortage of money, and a border to secure against Russia on a budget. Afghanistan was never about the Afghan peasant, who was no more the Governor-General's problem than the Persian peasant was Alexander's. It was about the chiefs — whether one of them could be found or made to hold the passes so that Britain need not hold them itself. The whole tragedy is what it costs to learn that a chief who holds the passes for your money holds them only as long as the money lasts.

The landscape: a coalition that never became a country

Ahmad Shah Durrani founded what the books call an empire in 1747, and at its height it ran from eastern Persia to the Punjab. But it was never a self-running order. It was a *coalition* — a balance of armed Pashtun chiefs held together by one man's personal capacity to command them, to distribute the plunder of India among them, and to point their energies outward at Delhi rather than inward at each other. Mountstuart Elphinstone, who led the first British mission to the Afghans in 1808–09 and wrote the account every later officer read, saw the structure exactly, and his description is the whole landscape in a paragraph:

> *"Although the sovereign belonged to the tribe, the most respected perhaps of the various Durani clans, there were many others much more powerful and numerous, the heads of which conscious of their strength, approached the throne rather with a feeling of equality than of respect. If a request were denied or a rebuke given, they retired to their castles, drew out their followers, and became rebels."*

Read what that says about the seat. The throne existed, but it commanded no obedience the chiefs did not choose to give; it rested on nothing deeper than the reigning man's ability to out-command men who considered themselves his equals. Elphinstone drew the necessary conclusion himself: "an aristocracy so turbulent and puissant could only be restrained... by a monarch of great personal qualities, who could both command and compel their homage... it became necessary that the prince, in all splendid endowments, should surpass his nobles. Ahmed Shah was such a prince, but he was followed by successors of inferior ability, the consequence of which was that the kingdom was rent by rebellion, and broken up."

This is a warlordism that had not cooled. Contrast the Sokoto Caliphate that Britain would meet in northern Nigeria, where a jihad had concentrated authority into inheritable offices resting on a believed creed a century deep — a chair a stranger could sit down in and operate. The Durrani "empire" concentrated nothing into an office. Its cohesion lived in one man and died with him. Ahmad Shah died in 1772; within a generation his heirs were killing and blinding one another; by 1818 the Sadozai line held little more than Kabul and a day's ride around it, and by 1826 a Barakzai, Dost Mohammad Khan, had taken Kabul and founded a new dynasty on the old fractured ground. The throne was a prize fought over, not an apparatus that ran. When the British arrived they found not a country to be captured at its head but a landscape of fortified valleys, each chief a small warlord in his own right, coordination pooling nowhere it could be seized. There was, in the language of this collection, no chair — and unlike Kenya, there was not even a cheap-pole believed order beneath the missing seat. There was only more warlordism, all the way down, in the most defensible terrain on earth.

The first attempt: installing a seat that was never there

In 1838 the Governor-General, Lord Auckland, persuaded by his advisers Macnaghten and Burnes and by the fear of Russian influence at Kabul, resolved on the move that the whole position logic predicts will fail: to *install* a chair. Dost Mohammad, the sitting Barakzai amir, was judged unreliable, so Britain would depose him and restore an earlier ruler, Shah Shuja, deposed thirty years before and living as a pensioner in British India — a man with a claim on paper and no following on the ground. The Army of the Indus, some twenty thousand fighting men trailing thirty-eight thousand camp followers and thirty thousand camels, marched up through the passes in 1839, took Kandahar without a fight, stormed Ghazni, and put Shuja on the throne at Kabul in August. Dost Mohammad fled, later surrendered, and was exiled to India. On the surface it had worked.

It had not worked, and the reason is the entire study. Shuja was a seat with no warrant — an apex the conquered order did not recognise, propped upright by British bayonets. A deposed vizier of Kabul said the thing plainly to Burnes, watching Shuja's British-staged triumphal procession pass through silent, sullen crowds. His words are the epitaph of every installed chair:

> *"You have brought him by your money and your arms into Afghanistan. Leave him now with us and let him rule over us if he can."*

Let him rule over us if he can. That is the whole distinction between a chair and a puppet, stated by a man who understood his country better than the Governor-General did. A real seat draws obedience from something the ruled already believe or fear — an inherited legitimacy, a creed, a following. Shuja drew obedience from nothing but the army standing behind him, and everyone in Afghanistan could see it. He could not rule over them. He could only be held up.

And holding him up cost money — money the accountant in Calcutta did not want to spend. Here the case delivers its sharpest single fact, the fact that contains the entire theory of managed belief in one budgetary decision. The way Britain, and Dost Mohammad before it, had kept the passes open and the eastern chiefs quiet was by *subsidy* — regular payments, bribes in plain terms, to the tribal leaders around Kabul and the Khyber in exchange for their peace. It was rented loyalty, and it worked exactly as long as the rent was paid. In 1841, dismayed at the ballooning cost of the occupation and ordered to cut spending, Macnaghten reduced the subsidies. And the loyalty stopped, at once, because it had never been anything but rented.

Hold this beside the whole framework and it clarifies everything. A believed order is loyalty you own outright — the Hausa cultivator obeys his emir from a conviction a century deep, and it costs the ruler nothing to maintain because the belief is real in the believer and does the work by itself. A rented order is loyalty you lease — the Ghilzai chief keeps the pass open because you pay him to, and the instant you stop paying he is exactly what he was before you paid him: an armed man with his own interests and a fort in the hills. Britain in Afghanistan had no believed loyalty and could not manufacture any, so it rented — and then, being short of money, it tried to economise on the rent, and discovered that rented loyalty is the one thing you cannot economise on, because the payment *is* the loyalty. Cut it and there is nothing underneath. **The subsidy is the naked form of the expensive pole: an order that runs on force and money the whole time, with no reserve of belief to fall back on, so that the moment the money slackens the order simply ceases to exist.**

The rest followed fast. Through 1841 the countryside stirred; Dost Mohammad's son, Akbar Khan, gathered the chiefs the subsidy cuts had freed. In November the British resident Burnes was murdered in Kabul. The garrison, absurdly, sat not in the strong Bala Hissar fortress but in an indefensible cantonment on low ground overlooked by hills — a decision of the elderly, irresolute General Elphinstone that a subordinate general called the work of "the most incompetent soldier who ever became general." Macnaghten, still trying to bribe and split his way out, was murdered at a parley by Akbar Khan in December. And in January 1842 the garrison accepted terms and marched out — some 4,500 troops and over 12,000 camp

followers, sixteen thousand and more souls all told — into the snow of the passes, where the tribes fell on the column and destroyed it. The figure that survives in the British memory is one: Assistant Surgeon William Brydon, reaching Jalalabad alone on a dying horse, the reported sole European survivor of the retreat, though a hundred-odd prisoners and hostages were later ransomed back. An army of the world's foremost empire, annihilated by a coalition of chiefs it had tried to rule by installing a man over them who could not rule them himself.

Britain returned that autumn with an "Army of Retribution," beat the tribes in the field — the floor could always win a battle — burned the great bazaar of Kabul as a mark of vengeance, recovered its prisoners, and left. Shah Shuja, the installed chair, was assassinated within months of losing his British props. And Dost Mohammad, the man Britain had deposed to make room for its puppet, was quietly released from India and allowed to return to the throne he had held all along. The empire had spent an army and a fortune to remove a functioning warlord, install one who could not function, watch him and its own garrison destroyed, and then restore the original. The net movement was nil, minus the dead.

The lesson mislearned, then learned

For nearly forty years Britain kept out. Then, in 1878, the same fear — Russian influence at Kabul — drove the same policy, and the Second Anglo-Afghan War opened with the same early success: columns through the passes, the Afghan army brushed aside, the amir's son Yaqub Khan brought to terms at Gandamak in 1879, a British Resident, Cavagnari, installed at Kabul. And then the same result, compressed: within weeks Cavagnari and his mission were massacred in a rising, and Britain was again occupying a country that would not hold still, fighting the same kind of war against the same kind of enemy — including a sharp defeat at Maiwand in 1880, where Ayub Khan's forces cut up a British-Indian brigade, before Roberts's celebrated march from Kabul to Kandahar retrieved the military situation.

The military situation was never the problem. The British could always win the battles; what they could not do was convert winning the battles into an order that ran without them. And this time, having paid the tuition once in 1842 and half-forgotten it, they finally learned the lesson the position logic teaches — not by conquering better, but by giving up on conquest and doing the only thing that works when there is no chair to seize: find a real warlord who can command the country himself, and pay him to do it on your behalf, at arm's length, with no garrison of yours to hold up.

The man was Abdur Rahman Khan — grandson of Dost Mohammad, twelve years an exile under Russian protection, a hard and capable soldier with a genuine following and the ruthlessness to build more. He was not Britain's creature; he had lived on Russia's charity and would spend his reign acting against British wishes as often as with them, running his own diplomacy, writing pamphlets that preached jihad against both empires. He was, in every sense, a genuine Afghan warlord — which is precisely why the arrangement worked where Shuja had failed. At the durbar of July 1880 the British recognised him as amir, granted him a subsidy and arms and a promise of aid against unprovoked foreign aggression, took control only of his *foreign* relations — the one thing they actually needed, a buffer that would not let Russia in — and then did the decisive thing: they left. The last British troops were out by April 1881. No Resident forced on him at Kabul; no garrison propping him up; no British bayonets between him and his people.

And it held. Abdur Rahman spent twenty-one years welding the fractured warlordism into something closer to a state than it had ever been — by methods that make the phrase "Iron Amir" an understatement: crushing rebellion after rebellion, executing and deporting on a scale that a British official called a reign of terror, forcibly transplanting whole Pashtun tribes to the north to break their power and screen the frontier, running a police state on a web of informers, with a toll of the executed run into the tens of thousands and beyond. This was the self-running order being *built* the way such orders are always built at the start — by a warlord with a sword, concentrating coordination into an apex by force, so that it could later cool into something his heirs would inherit as simply the way Afghanistan was. Britain did not build it and could not have. It could only recognise the man who was building it, pay him, and stand back.

Reading Afghanistan against the framework

The framework says a conqueror's options are set by what the previous order left him — whether coordination had pooled into a seizable apex he could rent, or run through forms that left nothing to seize. Afghanistan confirms it in the hardest form and sharpens it in three ways.

First, an installed chair is not a chair. The deposed vizier said it in 1839 and two wars proved it: *let him rule over us if he can.* A seat draws obedience from something the ruled already hold — belief, fear, inherited legitimacy, a following. A man set on the throne by a foreign army draws obedience from the army alone, and is therefore not an apparatus the conqueror can rent but a weight the conqueror must carry. **You**

cannot manufacture a chair by putting a claimant on a throne; you can only manufacture a puppet, and a puppet is a cost, not an apparatus — the difference is whether he can rule when your army goes home, and the installed man never can. Shuja could not; Abdur Rahman, who was never installed but recognised, could.

Second, rented loyalty is the naked expensive pole, and its tell is that it collapses the instant the payment stops. Where belief has taken, loyalty is owned and costs nothing to keep; where it has not, loyalty must be leased, and the lease runs exactly as long as the money. Macnaghten cut the subsidies to save money and the loyalty evaporated the same season, because there was no belief underneath the payment — the payment *was* the bond. **The surest test of whether an order runs on conviction or on cash is to stop paying: a believed order holds and a rented one dissolves, and Afghanistan dissolved because Britain had never bought anything but rent.** This is the same reading the *kipande* gave in Kenya — surveillance and payment are the tells of a belief that never took — arriving here as a line in an occupation budget.

Third — the resolution that took two wars to reach — where there is no chair to seize, the cheapest workable move is not to build one but to rent the warlord who is building his own. Britain failed twice trying to *install* an apex and succeeded once it gave up and *recognised* one — paid a genuine, independent warlord to be the apparatus, took only the foreign policy it actually needed, and withdrew entirely, leaving the man to concentrate the country by his own sword and his own terror. **A conqueror who finds no seat has three moves: hold the ground himself forever at ruinous cost (the occupation, which failed), install a puppet and hold him up forever at ruinous cost (Shuja, who was destroyed), or find a real warlord, pay him, and leave (Abdur Rahman, which worked) — and only the third is cheap, because only the third rents an apparatus that runs on its own builder's belief and force rather than on the conqueror's.** The buffer state was not a lesser form of empire. It was the recognition that in a country offering no seat and no believed order to inherit, the only affordable relationship is to pay the strongest local warlord to keep the door shut, and otherwise stay out.

That is why Afghanistan is remembered as the graveyard of the ambition to rule it and never of the ambition to fence it. Britain got exactly what it needed — a buffer that kept Russia out of the passes — the moment it stopped trying to sit in a chair that was never there, and started paying the man who could make his own.

A note on sources. Mountstuart Elphinstone's descriptions of the Durrani polity — the chiefs approaching the throne "rather with a feeling of equality than of respect" and retiring to their castles to "become rebels," and the observation that such an aristocracy could be held only by a prince who "in all splendid endowments should surpass his nobles" — are quoted from his *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (1815, public domain) as reproduced in the historical record; the wording is given as there rendered. The deposed vizier's rebuke to Alexander Burnes — "You have brought him by your money and your arms into Afghanistan. Leave him now with us and let him rule over us if he can" — is quoted from the account of the 1839 durbar as reproduced in the military-history literature (it descends from the nineteenth-century narratives, including Kaye's history of the war); it is given as there rendered and should be treated as reliable in substance rather than as a certified verbatim original. The narrative of the First Anglo-Afghan War — the Army of the Indus and its numbers, the taking of Kandahar and Ghazni, the installation of Shah Shuja (August 1839), the reduction of tribal subsidies by Macnaghten in 1841 and the consequent collapse of tribal loyalty, the murders of Burnes and Macnaghten, the indefensible cantonment and General Elphinstone's incapacity, the January 1842 retreat and the destruction of a column of some sixteen thousand, the survival of Assistant Surgeon William Brydon, the Army of Retribution, the assassination of Shah Shuja, and the restoration of Dost Mohammad — follows the standard accounts (Kaye; and modern historians including William Dalrymple, *Return of a King*) and is paraphrased and credited; casualty and column figures are given as the sources give them and vary in the detail. The Second Anglo-Afghan War — the fear of Russian influence, the Treaty of Gandamak (1879), the massacre of Cavagnari's mission, Maiwand (1880), Roberts's march to Kandahar, and the recognition of Abdur Rahman Khan as amir with a subsidy, arms, British control of Afghan foreign relations, and full British military withdrawal by April 1881 — follows the standard accounts (Robson, *The Road to Kabul*; Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*; Lee, *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present*) and is paraphrased and credited. Abdur Rahman's twenty-one-year consolidation, his methods and their toll, and his epithet "the Iron Amir," follow the same sources and the country-study literature and are paraphrased; the figures for executions and deaths under his rule are contested and are given as ranges the sources report. The comparison with the Sokoto Caliphate draws on the Northern Nigeria study in this collection, and the comparison with the Kikuyu order on the Kenya study.

Legibility is not pardon. The account is reconstructed from the top of the world — the Governor-General's arithmetic, not the pew's — so that the two disasters read as what they were: the predictable price of trying to install a seat where none existed, paid twice before the empire learned to rent the warlord instead of building the puppet. Naming that logic explains the catastrophe; it does not excuse the men who marched sixteen thousand people into the snow to prove it.

The arithmetic is laid out. The sum is left to the reader.

Part of the collection Patterns of Power. Tested, never revealed.